Do 'Global Generations' Exist?
From Mannheim to Beck and Beyond

Introduction

There is today persistent debate in journalism and politics about social generations. Controversies about entities such as Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Generations X, Y and Z abound. Talk about generations and inter-generational clashes provides a way to narrate the nature of social change (Jaeger, 1985, White, 2013). Meanwhile, social scientists point out that young(er) people across the planet today seem to be in increasingly similar socio-economic, political and cultural situations. These involve shared forms of experience, as well as means of dealing with often highly challenging circumstances (Cicchelli and Octobre, 2018).

Empirical trends for younger people in many places include: spending longer in formal education; enduring non-secure forms of employment, casualization of contracts, and widespread un- and under-employment; the monopolization of scarce resources by older generations; decreasing welfare entitlements; challenges attendant upon changing urban and rural living conditions; health problems, including sexual and mental ailments; increasing inequalities on class, gender, ethnic, sexual and other lines; spiralling debt and financial problems; lack of adequate housing; and being more fully and directly exposed to disruptive global(izing) forces, especially those of the neo-liberal capitalist system, than are older groups which may enjoy somewhat more cushioned social circumstances (Blossfeld et al, 2005).

Moreover, the lives of many younger people across the world today are also marked by 'digital communications facilitating wider cultural flows, and new attitudes towards relationships and career' (Woodman, 2016). One can plausibly argue that today 'there is more of significance in young lives than ever before that ignores established borders … contemporary young lives do in very many cases look different from their parents' lives at the same point [in the life-course], as previous ways of living become impossible or too costly for them to pursue … Young people are responding by reimagining work, family, and mobility, … becom[ing] one of the forces driving social change by doing so' (ibid.). It might therefore make good analytic sense today to conceive of *all* young people across the world, despite differences to do with geographical location, as being in the same overall situation, in terms of risk (increasing for most), life-chances (decreasing for many) and precarious life-situations (getting more extreme for the majority).

One way of understanding this situation is to say that the current global capitalist system certainly creates, and arguably requires, a trans-national, youthful 'precariat' in all parts of the globe (Standing, 2014). But it also raises another possible theorization: understanding 'younger' people across the world today as one single 'global generation', as well as identifying other, older generations which may also be globally - or at least trans-nationally - present. The concept of 'global generation(s)' has been promoted as a productive device for connecting youth studies with social theory, especially theories of globalization (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Ideas of 'global generations' have been promoted by leading social theorists Bryan S. Turner and the partnership of Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim.

Proponents of the concept usually acknowledge that any sociological conceptualisation of putative 'global generations' must recognise that 'there remain vast differences and vast inequalities within and between different parts of the world' and therefore geography 'remains important to designating generational change' (Woodman, 2016). Nonetheless, despite national

and regional variations of circumstances and experiences, the proponents argue that there is enough commonality across the world today for us to speak meaningfully of truly *global* generational formations, especially concerning 'younger' people. This commonality is both product and expression of trans-national, globalizing forces. In Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's terminology, such a 'cosmopolitan' empirical situation needs an equally 'cosmopolitan' type of sociology of generations to understand properly. The established analysis of social generations stretches back at least to Karl Mannheim's (1952 [1927/8]) pioneering statements in the 1920s. The Mannhemian tradition now needs to be subjected to profound 'cosmopolitan' refurbishment, so that it may better understand cross-border, trans-national, 'cosmopolitan' phenomena, both global generations and those forces which are identified as creating them.

What if this 'cosmopolitan sociology' finds generational phenomena that it mislabels and erroneously attributes certain properties to? In this paper, we argue that many of the theoretical claims about 'global generations' made by the theorists are in various ways overstated, crude, confused and confusing. Much of the muddle derives not just from the notoriously slippery nature of the concept of social generations itself, which we review in the first section, but also from imperfect readings and usages of Mannheim's original ideas. We consider the latter in the second section, and the problems deriving from how it has been understood in the final three sections.

We will show that attempts to 'update' Mannheim's ideas for a supposedly 'global age' are misbegotten in two intersecting ways: 1) they often lapse into forms of determinism that Mannheim himself avoided; 2) they assume that Mannheim's ideas *must* be outdated, while we show that these are in fact much more globally-oriented, or 'cosmopolitan', and attuned to cultural phenomena than the critics allege. We also show how Beck and Beck-Gernsheim get into serious confusion when they conflate, at a putatively global level, generations and age cohorts, which is exactly what Mannheim's definition of generations as self-conscious entities was intended to avoid. We conclude by staking a claim for the ongoing relevance of Mannheim's thinking in contemporary cosmopolitan sociological understandings of generations and globalization, even if the concept of global generations itself is highly problematic.

Generations in Question

The study of social generations is not a straightforward exercise. It is replete with multiple conceptual, definitional and empirical challenges. This is because 'generations are not born, they are made. They are a device by which people' - academic analysts, political commentators, marketeers, etc. - 'conceptualise society and seek to transform it' (Wohl, 1979: 5). To name generations and their supposed relations with each other, is to put human faces onto otherwise faceless age cohorts and demographic trends. It is also to arrogate to oneself the power to explain, order and periodize history and society, to identify major axes of social conflict, and possibly to speak out against forms of inter-generational injustice (Bourdieu, 1991).

Generations can be constructed by analysts - both academic and otherwise - in multiple, potentially contradictory, ways, including:

- in simple demographic terms: as cohorts of people born around a **certain time-period**, which is defined as somehow socially significant (e.g. those born immediately after WWII; those born after 2000, etc.)

- in more complex (and thereby contestable) cultural terms: as groups thought to be marked by a particularly compelling - and perhaps especially traumatic - **historical event** (or events), especially political and economic, such that responses to that event are shared in profound socio-psychological ways by members of that group, and such that their 'group-ness' can be identified by analysts (e.g. 'the Great Depression generation', 'the World War II generation', the '1968 generation', the '9/11 generation', the 'Financial Crisis generation', etc.)

- in other cultural terms: as collectivities of people, of about the same biological age, whose identities and practices are thoroughly interconnected with, and can be claimed to be shaped by, some specific type of **media and communication platform** (e.g. the radio generation', 'the Internet generation', the 'App generation', etc.)

- in further cultural terms: as entities which are marked by their members' tastes in, and dispositions towards, **cultural/aesthetic products** (most notably, music), and whose orientations are apparently discernible enough to mark them off from what are taken to be 'other' generations (e.g. 'the Woodstock generation', 'the Spice Girls generation', etc.).

Sometimes these various putative generations are discussed in mostly national terms, such as in political polemics about who is responsible for the national debt and the coming pensions crisis in specific national economic systems (White, 2013). Sometimes the frame of reference of generations talk is more trans-national in nature, pointing towards, for example, the allegedly negative socio-political dispositions of the 'Baby Boomer' generation, an entity understood to be present across the whole Developed World (White, 2013).

Journalistic and political terms like 'Baby Boomers' provide ammunition for politicians, pamphleteers and activists to polemicise against each other as to who is to blame for society's ills. But they are of not much analytic help to social scientists. Such imprecise, often polemical terms can occlude differences *within* so-called generations, and may obfuscate similarities *across* putative generations (Crawford and Robinson, 2013, Kelan, 2014). Terminology like 'the App generation' or the 'Facebook generation' is much too crude to yield much analytical purchase: a whole 'generation' is supposedly totally marked, and somehow even created, by their alleged use of a specific form of communication technology (Vaidhyanathan, 2008). Such terminology exhibits a simplistic technological determinism.

Analysis of, and polemics about, 'generations' are usually bound up with controversies over 'youth' and its antitheses. The group(s) defined as the 'new' and 'young' (or 'younger') generation(s) are often taken to be the catalysts for wider social change. Two opposite routes are then possible. The 'young(er)' generation(s) can be constructed as the *agents* of change, for good or ill. But they can also be presented as the *victims* of that change, which can in turn be construed as brought about by the activities of those defined as the 'older' generation(s) (White, 2013). For example, one could polemically posit the creators of the victimhood of today's younger 'global generation' as the trans-nationally villainous generation of Baby Boomers.

The academic study of social generations is meant to be much more terminologically precise and les overtly polemical than journalistic and political talk about generations. The concept of social generations first appeared in Western Europe in the late 18th century. The political ferment caused by the French Revolution was conjoined with the unsettling effects of

industrialization and the development of capitalist economic relations. The first modern usages of social (as opposed to familial) 'generations' were intended to capture the nature of the changes both national societies and wider European society were undergoing, and to present and comprehend the perceived novelty of social upheavals (Wohl, 1979).

From its inception the idea of social generations has appealed to those looking to diagnose social change, especially of massive and disruptive varieties (Graubard, 1978). That is probably why it is an appealing concept for social theorists. Moreover, the idea of social generations was a non-parochial, and at least implicitly 'cosmopolitan', idea right from the start. It was, like the contemporary and equally novel notion of social class, meant to grasp processes of social change that were both national and trans-national in nature. Although concepts of class and generation were born around the same time, they have been often uneasy bed-fellows ever since, especially when analysts have claimed one or the other as the master concept for understanding social transformation (see the recent debate between Woodman and Wyn (2015) and France and Roberts (2015)).

A focus on 'generations' was strongly connected to a new conception of 'youth', the aim being to understand how new, 'youthful' generations are both products of, and creative agents in, wider social changes perceived to be taking place. From the later 18th through to the mid-19th century, in both political discourse and the emerging social sciences, 'youth' was widely perceived to be the creator of the future of society. This is an assumption that continues to inform present-day analyses of generations, including putatively global ones (Wohl, 1979). But over time, the earlier theme of the positive accomplishments of specific generations, especially 'younger' ones, has become much rarer, such that discussion of social generations has often become a proxy for thematizing what are taken to be major negative social changes and challenges (Kriegel, 1978).

It is conventional for academic analysts today to distinguish between three separable categories: an individual's *life-course*; demographic *age cohorts*, which are statistical units with fixed boundaries determined by the analyst (e.g. all those people born in France between 1970 and 1985); and *generations*. Following Mannheim's seminal definition (see below), these latter entities are usually taken to be *more than* age cohorts. Large numbers of people in a supposed generation must possess a certain level of self-consciousness, seeing themselves as members of that generation (Burnett, 2010). A 'generation' on this definition is therefore one or more age cohorts, the members of which have in significant numbers become conscious of themselves collectively *as* a generation.

There are seemingly endless epistemological difficulties involved in identifying and naming generations. Every social scientific definition of a generation, including putatively 'global' ones, can be criticized as vague, open-ended and disputable (Spitzer, 1973, Corsten 1999). There are no clear guidelines in the social scientific literature about what a 'generation' is, or how any specific empirical instances may be identified (Pilcher, 1994). As White (2013) points out, there is a certain ambiguity in most, if not all, definitions of generations. They fuse the more materialist, demographic aspects of age cohorts together with more cultural factors. The latter especially concern members' self-consciousness of themselves as generational members. They may also involve those favoured and predominant tastes and practices which are shared by significant numbers of those people who are understood to be part of the generation in question.

Identifying a given group of people *as* a generation involves a certain intellectual leap of faith. It involves a speculative act of naming, under-determined by the mere fact that the group in question is made up of one or more demographic age cohorts. The naming of a generation is therefore more a matter of argumentation, assertion and interpretation than of any straightforward depiction of accepted 'facts' (Cavalli 2004). Specific problems that have been identified in naming generations abound What if the supposed generation is extrapolated by analysts from the experiences of a non-representative, often elite, minority? Do individuals absolutely need to be conscious of being part of a generation invoked by analysts? To what degree must such self-consciousness exist, and how is to be evidenced? What if individuals understand themselves through generational labels that have been invented by others, including for the purposes of marketing certain goods to them (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014, France and Roberts, 2015)? All such problems apply to the identification of generations at any level, nationally, trans-nationally or globally. Indeed, the problems of identifying and naming generations become ever more difficult the more the analyst moves to a putatively global level. It is more challenging to name a generation the more geographically and culturally compendious and multifarious the phenomena to be covered by that naming become.

(Re-)Considering Mannheim

Any understanding of supposedly 'global generations' must come to terms with Karl Mannheim's pioneering work on social generations, whether to update, repudiate or find new inspiration within it. We accordingly review his ideas in this section.

The early 20th century saw a spurt of strong generational consciousness among the European intelligentsia (Howe and Strauss, 2000). In the years after WWI, in both victorious and defeated countries, there were strong feelings about the waste of the 'lost generation' (primarily of men) who had been killed during the war. In Germany this sensibility was infused with a strong sense of the social disruptions entailed by the defeat of 1918 and the revolutionary socio-political upheavals in Russia and elsewhere (Eyerman and Turner, 1998). Throughout the 1920s, there was widespread perception of a vast experiential gulf separating those who had direct, first-hand experience of the fighting - by now understood to be a 'generation' in themselves - and those who had not, the latter being perceived of as a new, 'younger' generation (Wohl, 1979).

It was within these socio-cultural conditions that Karl Mannheim (1952 [1927-8]) wrote his essay on generations. Interestingly for our purposes, the essay begins with consideration of late 19th century French authors who had written about generations. Mannheim argues that such writings were stimulated by 'the sudden eclipse of liberal cosmopolitanism as a result of the arrival of a nationalistically-minded young generation' on the French political and cultural scene (1952 [1927-8]: 280).

The main points Mannheim makes are well-known and can be treated briefly. Mannheim sees his generations concept as avoiding the 'jumbling together [of] purely biological phenomena and others which are the products of social and cultural forces' (ibid., 311). Age cohorts (people born within a certain defined time-period) are emphatically not the same as a 'generation'. Instead, a generation comes into actual, rather than merely potential, existence 'through the medium of social events' (286) – that is, for contingent socio-historical reasons.

Mannheim understands a 'generation' as a self-conscious entity. He models this on Marx's distinction, itself ultimately derived from Hegel, between a *class in-itself* (an aggregate of

people in the same socio-economic position) and a *class for-itself* (the people in the aggregate come to realise that they are members of a class, and self-consciously struggle to achieve that class's interests). Whether an age cohort (an un-self-conscious aggregate) can come to self-consciousness, and thereby come to constitute a fully-fledged 'generation', is purely contingent, depending 'entirely on the *trigger action* of the social and cultural process' in given times and places (310; emphasis added). Some age cohorts may never be 'triggered' into becoming self-conscious generations, and therefore do not become 'generations' at all. When such 'triggering' does happen, 'individual members of a generation become conscious of their common situation and make this consciousness the basis of their group solidarity' (290), and so come to participate in 'the common destiny' of the generational group (303). The material and ideological circumstances surrounding and created by the generation restricts certain possibilities for all group members, while opening-up others.

Mannheim argues that the forging of generational consciousness is likely to happen to an individual from about the age of 17 onwards, the point where a truly questioning attitude towards the wider world allegedly begins (300; Larson and Lizardo, 2007). The movement from potential to actual generations is strongly connected to people of that age group experiencing rapid and disruptive social change (309). Young people become 'dramatically aware of a process of de-stabilization and take sides in it' (301). Wars are particularly apt to be triggers of generational consciousness-formation, because of their radically de-stabilizing qualities. Present-day critics have, however, argued that teenage years and the 20s need not necessarily be the time of generational consciousness formation. This could happen later in individuals' life-courses, or in childhood (France and Roberts, 2015).

Mannheim claims that self-conscious generations are particularly liable to form in his own historical period due to the 'accelerated pace of social change characteristic of our time' (287). This is a sentiment echoed in later writing on global generations. But Mannheim adds something that later authors do not tend to consider: overly rapid and profound social change may be so disturbing that it destroys the potential for an age cohort to become a self-conscious generation (310).

As a sociologist of knowledge, Mannheim's concern was to understand how new forms of thinking are created within specific social conditions. The most active groupings within a younger generation may act as crucibles for the creation of fresh mental patterns, which are marked departures from those of previous generations. As a student of political ideologies, Mannheim's focus is on concrete groupings of intellectuals and political activists within 'young' generations. Ideas emanating from these quarters may come to influence large sections of their own (broadly defined) age group, and then possibly other generations too. 'Attitudes and formative tendencies' worked up by particular groups of young(er) intellectuals and activists can float free, 'exercising an appeal and binding force over a much wider area' (307). Broader social relations and cultural patterns are thereby transformed.

Within each generation, there are different sub-groups, which Mannheim calls 'generation units' (304). 'Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within that actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units' (304). Mannheim modelled this general argument on the 19th century European case, where successive younger generations were split between more radical and reactionary political impulses. Mannheim believes that the idea of generation units solves the

problem of attributing too much unanimity to all the members of a generation, for it acknowledges different and possibly antagonistic political orientations within the broader grouping. But ultimately a generation is intellectually united because all members share the same historical circumstances, and the same broad frames of reference for comprehending those circumstances. The different generational units are united precisely *because* they clash with each other, with their conflicts being framed within ultimately shared assumptions and concerns (307).

Is Mannheim 'Outdated'? The Cases of Media and 'Traumatic' Events

It has become common in the recent literature on global generations to assume that Mannheim's approach *must* be outdated, because of the vastly more globalized world we live in today, in comparison to that of the 1920s. Turner and Edmunds (2005: 564) argue that Mannheim 'could scarcely have imagined the ways in which [today] … generations across national borders could experience an event simultaneously'. Crawford and Robinson (2013: 476) likewise contend that 'in Mannheim's terms, generations are formed by a set of experiences shared by people in a similar cultural milieu at the same time. But, in a globalized world, cultural milieu[x] are no longer strictly limited by geography or age'.

Mannheim is therefore alleged to have stressed the direct and geographically limited experiencing of events as being at the root of generational consciousness. Later analysts indicate the apparently antiquated nature of his thinking by stressing *mediated* experiences as the essential generational-consciousness trigger mechanisms of more recent times. Given that a central component of the complex globalization of our own period involves the operation of trans-national mass media and internet communications, then it is these which operate as the main trigger mechanisms which stimulate generational self-consciousness. Major, especially traumatic, events, such as 9/11, are seen to have the potential to create generational self-consciousness across national and other boundaries, precisely because they appear everywhere across the planet in mediated form. The vastly increased power of media to represent such events, and to reach ever wider audiences around the world, is a condition of possibility for the fostering of truly global generations, encompassing people from all parts of the planet whose formative experiences are all marked by the same event(s) (Eyerman and Turner, 1998).

This sort of contention has a certain surface-level plausibility. But when examined carefully, serious problems emerge. We can discern a kind of *trauma-determinism*, whereby traumatic events are ascribed with the direct (unmediated?) power of fostering generational consciousness This uncritically upholds Mannheim's assumptions about the power of traumatic events, experienced in adolescence and young adulthood, to create the sense of being a member of a generation. But there are no *necessary* reasons why certain events, as awful as they may be, *must* have generation-creating effects. As Mannheim himself sometimes stressed, whether self-conscious generations are in fact forged depends on specific, contingent, concrete and often highly localised social circumstances. A traumatic event therefore may or not help to create generational consciousness. This depends on specific circumstances and concrete mechanisms. It is not enough to speculate - as do Turner and Edmunds (2005) - why the happenings of what is conventionally referred to as '9/11' could have created a trans-national generation of younger people who 'witnessed' it. The sociological task is instead to find out empirically how 9/11 has been variously made sense of, or partly or wholly ignored, by different social groups in different parts of the planet. These are empirical issues that can only

be pursued through a range of carefully-calibrated research methods and cannot be decided by assertion or theorizing alone.

This *trauma-determinism* is tied to an equally problematic *media-based technological-determinism.* Edmunds and Turner (2005) base their history of the claimed increasing globalization of generations on the rise of novel forms of media and communication. On their account, the late 19th century sees the appearance of 'international' generations – expressed in the case of the Socialist International – which are made possible by (primarily) national, and (to a lesser degree) trans-national, print media. The mid-20th century is the period of 'trans-national' generations, made possible by the broadcast media of cinema, radio and then TV. The late 20th century and after is the time of 'global' generations as such, facilitated by trans-national media flows and the internet, which is taken to be a uniquely interactive medium. Now people in radically different parts of the world 'can be linked through shared international experience rather than shared local experience' (ibid.: 568), and what these authors call the new 'internet generation' of younger people is 'instantly globally connected' (ibid.: 569).

Edmunds and Turner admit the obvious point that this putative generation is nationally and regionally differentiated. But they claim nonetheless that it is unified in the sense that it has, and that its members possess, a 'sense of being part of a shared history' (ibid., 567), such as through being exposed by globalized media to traumatic events like 9/11. An explicit Mannhemian logic is at work here. It is claimed that different generational units, despite their ostensible differences, all in fact are part of one single generation.

But there are various problems with this claim. People of the same age cohort in different parts of the world have, via conceptual fiat, been re-defined as specific units of the same single generation. This redefinition both assumes that such a generation exists in the first place, while also conjuring away all the other differences that may otherwise be found to differentiate such people. It is assumed that everyone of a certain age group, whoever and wherever they are, are members of a generational sub-unit, just because the analysts say so, and whether the actors themselves think that or not. The latter claim does not fit well with another assumption taken from Mannheim, namely that members of a generation are meant to have a modicum of consciousness of being members of a given generation.

Moreover, the supposed single global generation is assumed by Turner and Edmunds to have been defined by a traumatic event or events. The 'events themselves unify [all members] as a generation' (ibid., 572). Such 'events' are assumed somehow to exist in and of themselves, and to have independent generation-forming power. That assumption is already questionable. It is even more open to doubt when it has already been yoked by Turner and Edmunds to an account of forms of media and communication. We might object that surely there are no such things as events 'in themselves', for they are always and inevitably presented, re-presented and made sense of by people through media channels?

Therefore, instead of understanding traumatic events and media formations as being mutually reinforcing factors in generational consciousness-formation, one might argue the converse: that the more complex the media ecology, the less directly efficacious traumatic events may be on individuals and groups, including those younger people that Mannheimian thinking assumes are particularly impressionable about such matters. As Crawford and Robinson (2013: 476) contend, cultural milieux today, strongly informed by national and trans-national media flows

> … are highly fractured and dispersed … Significant events such as wars, recessions, mass protests, and so on may be shared by many or by a smaller subset within particular cultural, social, and economic niches. Rather than creating easily identifiable generations, digital media technologies create various networks of association and knowledge. These networks have varying levels of cohesion, power, and visibility. Some may be invisible, such as the network of friends listed in a 'most called' list on a mobile phone. Others – brought together by politics, music, institutional or class association, a natural disaster, or a war – leave visible traces across social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Networks of association can be both voluntary and involuntary, and they have their own distinct patterns of technological engagement.

In other words, while Turner and Edmunds argue that globalized and globalizing mass media and internet communication technologies are the triggering mechanisms for generational self-consciousness, especially when they mediate traumatic events, the opposite situation may be true. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009: 26) put it, because 'global experiences and images are constantly combining with local traditions, historical experiences, models, the same events and phenomena are differently perceived, categorized, [and] valued' by different people, depending on who they are and where they live. This is a point that Mannheim would likely have agreed with, judging by his comments on the contingency of social life in the generations essay.

So fractured and dispersed is the contemporary ecology of media across the world today, with so many varied possibilities of response and meaning-making by audience members and internet participants to mediated events, that traumatic events may in fact be *less* efficacious at triggering generational self-consciousness than they were in the past, including in Mannheim's time and before. Just because 9/11 is known about by people of the same age cohort in, for example, Buenos Aires and Jakarta, there is presumably nothing intrinsic to that event or its diverse forms of mediation which must necessarily, or even possibly, create a shared sense of generational membership among such people. Turner and Edmunds' assumption that the *trauma-plus-global-media* nexus has the power to create such generational sensibilities therefore seems questionable on a range of fronts, and their 'updating' of Mannheim less than convincing.

Is Mannheim Not as 'Outdated' as is Claimed? The Cases of 'Methodological Nationalism' and Cultural/Aesthetic Products

If Turner and Edmunds' attempts to update Mannheim for present-day purposes are open to question, perhaps Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009) have been more successful? In their view, the sociology of generations was for decades guilty of 'methodological nationalism', where it was assumed that generations existed within, rather than across, nation-states. This is seen to derive ultimately from Mannheim's methodologically nationalist dispositions. How accurate are such claims?

Mannheim's examples of generations do indeed come primarily from mid-19th century Germany, a period of awakening among a younger generation of pan-German national consciousness. Yet while Mannheim's essay may be superficially nation-based and Eurocentric, it is not methodologically nationalist in its fundamental principles. Instead, the underlying assumptions derive from the 'cosmopolitan' dispositions of classical sociology, and not the methodologically nationalist dispositions of the professionalised national sociologies

which were formed *after* Mannheim's essay was written – i.e. mostly after WWII (Albrow, 1990).

Indeed, one of the most eloquent recent statements as to classical sociology's profound analytical and political cosmopolitanism is by none other than Bryan Turner (2006) (although Mannheim's cosmopolitan dispositions are oddly denied in the paper written with Edmunds). Mannheim's essay should be situated in that cosmopolitan tradition, and not erroneously placed in a later set of methodologically nationalist orientations. There is nothing in Mannheim's original model that would prevent him from examining the creation of entities that could be construed as trans-national or global generations. This becomes apparent when we turn to consider Mannheim's scattered, but explicit, remarks on national and trans-national social factors.

Mannheim gives an example of when an age cohort has *not* been transformed into a self-conscious 'generation'. There was no 'community of location between the young people of China and Germany about [the year] 1800. Only where contemporaries definitely are in a position to participate as an integrated group in certain common experience can we rightly speak of a generation. Mere contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it also involves participation in the same historical and social circumstances' (1952 [1927/8]: 298). Young Chinese and German age cohorts of that time were not sufficiently connected – socially, culturally, politically or economically – to be able to become part of one generation.

But Mannheim then goes onto demonstrate a situation where an age cohort was in fact transformed into a self-conscious generation, this time through the crucible of war. At the turn of the 19th century, urban and peasant youth in (non-unified) Germany were 'objectively' in the same 'generation location' (that is, age cohort), but not ('subjectively') bound together within the same self-conscious generation (303). The latter only comes to exist 'where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization'. In this case, both young town and country dwellers were 'sucked into the vortex of social change' created by the Napoleonic invasion of German states (303). Both groups therefore came to 'participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and … [came to] have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which ma[de] up the new situation' which they were compelled to join (304).

So, an inter-, and to some extent trans-, national conflict pulls together hitherto geographically and culturally unconnected groups, acts on the 'younger' members by imprinting on them at an early age some indelible experiences and perceptions, and thereby renders them all into one generation, which they are all aware, more or less explicitly, of being members of. This sets them into new relations with other age-based groups that they perceive as the 'older generation(s)'. Mannheim's logic here echoes Marx's account of the global spread of capitalism, whereby all nations are pulled into the capitalist mode of production, with profound alterations in their customary modes of thought and practice, including individuals being compelled to see themselves and others in new lights, including in terms of class membership, such as being part of the 'world proletariat' (Renton, 2001). In both Mannheim's and Marx's cases, inter-national or trans-national forces are seen to create new social groups and their members' senses of being members of those groups, whether these be classes or generations. This is certainly not a methodologically nationalist manner of thinking about generations.

Mannheim's original model of generations is much more attuned to trans-national, global and 'cosmopolitan' processes than critics have made out (Woodman, 2016).

There are also other ways in which Mannheim's approach is more potentially interesting, productive and up-to-date than has often been alleged. Mannheim has been widely criticized for overly focusing on the 'political' factors that create and bind generations, to the exclusion of dealing with apparently more 'modern' phenomena like shared tastes in popular music, mass media products, and internet-based leisure pursuits. Critics argue that Mannheim's position has now been fully superseded in this regard (Woodman and Wyn, 2014, Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014).

But this accusation is unfair, probably illustrating that the critics have not read Mannheim's generations essay carefully enough. Mannheim explicitly indicated there that he focuses on political factors to balance out the preponderance, in previous German language scholarship on generations, of discussion of generations in art history. The orientation towards political factors is therefore strategic and contingent, and not an essential part of the more general theory. Instead, Mannheim explicitly discusses the aesthetic dimensions and contours of generations. He notes that 'various cultural "fields" lend themselves as sounding boards for a new generation' (319).

Thus already in the 1920s Mannheim opens up an analytic avenue for examination of the role of cultural/aesthetic products in the production of generational consciousness. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) may be correct that Mannheim's essay might overly restrict creative, generation-consciousness-raising agency to elite groups within generations, rather than to 'ordinary' individuals. But they are wrong to say that these elites are understood by Mannheim only to be intellectuals in the business of creating political ideologies. The creators of generational self-consciousness may be 'artists' and cultural/aesthetic producers too, as Mannheim explicitly states in the essay.

Writing of how a person in their late teens or 20s may come to feel part of a generation, Mannheim notes that the 'profound emotional significance of a slogan, of an expressive gesture, or of a work of art lies in the fact that we do not merely absorb them as objective data, but also as vehicles of formative tendencies and fundamental integrative attitudes, thus identifying ourselves with a set of collective strivings' (305). Cultural/aesthetic objects and the ideas they convey may possess great 'group-forming potency'. Once these have been created and disseminated, they may be taken up and 're-created, rejuvenated and reinterpreted in novel situations' by a host of different individuals, each of which may then feel a sense of generational membership and identification (305).

Mannheim notes that such aesthetic products will be more efficacious in that regard, the more ambiguous, open-ended and available for creative reinterpretation they are. That is, the more scope they give for appealing to people of roughly the same age, but who are living in diverse geographical and cultural circumstances. Mannheim explicitly sees that 'attitudes and formative tendencies' can move beyond their original points of production – whether more local, regional or national – and come to exercise 'an appeal and binding force over a much wider area' than their original sphere of influence (307). That area could be trans-national in scope, or even 'global'. Mannheim's vision is therefore open to 'trans-national' forces in the production of equally 'trans-national' generations. One way in which such generations are created is through the shared appreciation of certain cultural/aesthetic objects, which can travel

across geographical and cultural boundaries. Mannheim's approach is therefore markedly more simultaneously 'global' and 'cultural' in tenor than the critics assume, and therefore much less 'outdated' than has been claimed.

Consideration of cultural/aesthetic products and processes suggests alternative mechanisms for generation-consciousness-creation beyond violent and traumatic events. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) are incorrect to claim that Mannheim's model fails to account for the creation of generational change and self-consciousness as involving 'global' processes, unless people are sucked into massive and obvious social disruption, as in the case of major wars. It is precisely because 'artists', as well as political ideologues, are seen to be creators of generational consciousness that there is room in Mannheim's model for understanding quotidian forms of generational consciousness-making in times of peace and relative social stability.

This point in turn suggests that we need to make a distinction between *rapid social change* - which Mannheim emphasises as being a major source of generational consciousness creation - and the kinds of *social instability* created by events like wars and revolutions. Mannheim is not only focused on the latter; he is also aware of peaceful variants of the former, which equally well can be involved in the creation of generations. We might expect 'artists' and their cultural/aesthetic products to be at the forefront of generation-making in periods of rapid but pacific social change. That has arguably been the case across much of the Developed World most of the time since 1945. There is space within Mannheim's original vision from the 1920s for consideration of the sorts of social dynamics, which may create self-conscious generations, that have been at work in the period from the end of WWII until today. His vision is not hopelessly rooted in the pre-War period, as the critics imply. It is as attuned to *trans-national, artistic and pacific* phenomena in the creation of generations as it is to *national, political and bellicose* ones. It is therefore both more contemporary and more 'cosmopolitan' than critics give it credit for.

The Uses of Mannheim: Global Generations, Generational Units and Age Cohorts

In this final section, we turn to the vexed issue of whether it is useful today to retain Mannheim's criterion that a generation must be defined as a self-conscious entity, if it is truly to count as a 'generation' and not just be identified as an age cohort or set of cohorts. This question is at the heart of contemporary efforts to identify whether there are indeed 'global generations' today.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009) pre-empt possible accusations that their assertion of the existence today of global generations would necessarily ignore 'all the variance and heterogeneity' between, for example a 20-something 'internet user in Hyderabad and one in Beijing or London' (Crawford and Robinson, 2013: 474). They write that analysts must not assume or look for 'a single, universal generation with common symbols and a unique consciousness'. Instead, one should identify 'a multiplicity of global generations that appear as a set of intertwined transnational generational constellations' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009: 25).

The rather confusing terminology deployed here is not assisted by a proliferation of terms meant to describe a (never properly defined) globally-present young(er) generation. Terms

used include ‘the rising generation’, ‘younger generations’ (in the plural), ‘the global generation’ (in the singular), and the ‘migration generation’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009: 25, 27, 31, 34). This echoes the confusing multiplicity of terms used by Turner and Edmunds (the ‘1990s generation’, the ‘internet generation’, the ‘9/11 generation’). Nonetheless, the Becks seem to be pointing towards the classic Mannheimian formulation of a single ‘younger’ generation – one now construed as trans-nationally and globally present – which contains within it multiple and potentially ideologically opposed generational units. This point becomes somewhat clearer when the Becks note that ‘in the “global generation” various transnational fractions are interlinked … the “mosaic pieces” of which simply cannot be fitted together to make a unified picture … [I]t is just this non-unity which permits the unity in diversity of the generational constellations to emerge - at the centre, on the periphery and in the opposition and interaction between them (34).

This analysis of the younger ‘global generation’ being divided into sub-units is driven by the Becks’ broader conception of globalization as a series of division-creating mechanisms. Globalization ‘does not at all mean that in the younger generation a worldwide convergence of social situations is taking place - from Dubai to Duisburg, from Bahia to Bremen. On the contrary: the inequality of life chances is all too conspicuous, and that is precisely what produces a particular tension and explosive force: the sphere of experience of the “global” generations’ may be globalized - but it is simultaneously characterized by sharp dividing lines and conflicts’ (ibid.: 26). So, there is one singular young(er) global generation, but it is sharply divided between two main generational units: a Developed World ‘generation less’, ‘which measured by preceding decades, has to accept material losses’; and a Developing World ‘generation more’, ‘which, motivated by images of an affluent West, wants to share in that wealth’. The Becks then say that both units are parts of one singular ‘global generation’ (ibid.: 33)

The Becks’ remarks about the dispositions of these two generational units lead us to the difficult issue of generational self-consciousness. They argue that ‘the activism of the global generation arises less in the centre than in the peripheral zones, in the regions of world risk society condemned to hopelessness’ (ibid.: 34). The more ‘active’ part of the ‘global generation’ is said to be ‘definitely not the Western, but the non-Western generation [unit], rising up against inequality across nation-state borders, putting down a claim on equality. “I want in” is the watchword of this worldwide generation [unit], standing at the gates of the Western societies and vigorously rattling the bars’ (ibid.: 28).

The ‘non-Western’ generational unit is seen to be ‘active’ but not politically so, if by ‘politics’ is meant – as the Becks seem to think – the sorts of claims to collective social betterment made across various countries, mostly but not only in the Developed World, by the ‘1968 generation’. Instead, the overall ‘global generation’ and its constituent units are ‘at heart unpolitical’, partly because the ‘different fractions [are] in a conflictual relationship with each other’, partly because both spurn 1968-style proactive ‘collective action’ in favour of ‘individualist reaction’ to existing circumstances (ibid.: 34).

The upshot of this analysis is that a singular ‘global generation’, constituted out of at least two main sub-units, one in the Developed World and the other in the Developing World, does indeed exist. But this is so only ‘objectively’ – that is, visible only through the lens of the cosmopolitan sociological analyst – rather than subjectively – that is, in the thoughts and

feelings of actors themselves. The Becks explicitly claim that there is today no 'self-conscious generation ... [endowed with a] cross-border view of life and of itself, with its own symbolism and language, goals and forms of activity' (ibid.: 26). Thus the 'global generation' exists, but it fails to meet the Mannheimian criterion of self-consciousness. It is a generation *in-itself* but not *for-itself*. Does that then mean that it is not a generation at all, but instead just a global(ized) age cohort?

There are two possible answers here, both derivable from Mannheim's reasoning. First, this putative global generation *is* indeed a 'generation', but one that remains 'silent', a 'failed generation' which has not fulfilled its potential to become a fully-fledged, self-conscious generational entity. Second, what the Becks call the 'global generation' has been mis-named by them, for it is not in fact a 'generation' at all, but rather is a globally distributed age cohort. If that is so, then there is no analytic gain made by dividing Developed and Developing World 'youth' into two generational sub-units, for there is no overarching 'generation' that they can be asserted to be sub-units of. Instead, it would be clearer and more logical to say that both Developed and Developing World 'youth' should be regarded merely as units within a global, or globalized, age cohort, which exists in objective, demographic terms, but not in the subjective terms of generational self-consciousness. The Becks' confusion in conflating age cohorts and generations - precisely the move that the Mannheimian approach forbids - could thus be avoided.

Why might the Becks have ended up in such conceptual confusion? It certainly sounds more appealing to a prospective audience to speak in the inspirational and exciting language of 'global generations' than to use the duller language of the demographer, framing matters in terms of world-level age cohorts. Talk of a young(er) global generation suggests youthfulness, sexiness, proactivity and exciting social change, *a la* movements like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and #MeToo, all of which are in various ways trans-national and cosmopolitan, having presence and ramifications across Developing and Developed Worlds.

But beyond surface verbal effects, there are also deep theoretical reasons for the confusion. The Becks' account of generations is embedded within, and a contribution to, the broader project of presenting individualization, Second Modernity, and world risk society as the key concepts of a cosmopolitan sociology, which is meant to replace methodologically nationalist analytic orientations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). While the Becks' thinking about generations is indebted to Mannheim, whose criterion of generational self-consciousness derives from Marx and ultimately Hegel, their wider project is rooted in another classical author, namely Immanuel Kant and his account of rising levels of cosmopolitan thought and practice across the world in his own time (Author 2, 2012). Kant in the late 18th century stressed the unintentional, unplanned and therefore non-self-conscious nature of the 'cosmopolitization' of reality, just as Marx – a student of both Kant and Hegel – did in the mid-19th century (Renton, 2001), and then 200 years later did Ulrich Beck.

This intellectual heritage makes the Becks' account of global generations rather different, in both assumptions and orientations, from the Hegel-Marx-Mannheim (and Turner) line of thought. The latter stresses the triggering mechanisms which produce generational self-consciousness. The broader Kant-Marx-Beck line of reasoning – which is separate from the Beck's specific use of the (Hegelian-Marxian) ideas of Mannheim on generations - is oriented to the analysis of 'objectively' existing social conditions. At least some of these are said by the

cosmopolitan sociological analyst to be 'cosmopolitan' in nature, even when no actual social actors would understand or experience them as such. Thus, the Kantian focus on unintended social consequences looks at how a diverse set of forces and processes, which can be grouped under the convenient shorthand label of 'globalization', produce age-cohort and demographic formations which are globally distributed, with the people in these cohorts resembling each other in certain ways, regardless of where in the world they may happen to live. In the case of 'youth' today, such resemblances would involve the apparently ubiquitous social factors of trans-national migration, working-life precarity and un- and under-employment, individualization processes, widespread risks, and suchlike. These are exactly the sorts of issues that the Becks would, and indeed do, highlight.

The demographic age-cohort formations which this Kantian form of analysis identifies as the objectively-existing unintended products of broader globalization dynamics may very well lack generational self-consciousness, again as the Becks explicitly note. Nonetheless, this Kantian way of thinking may want to label these non-self-conscious entities as 'generations', because for it, self-consciousness is not a key criterion for identifying the existence of a generation, while it is for the (Hegelian-Marxian) Mannheimian type of reasoning. If the latter's orientation towards self-consciousness as the central feature of a generation is dropped, it therefore becomes logically acceptable to do what the Becks have done: that is, to use the 'generation' term loosely, and apply it to a global(ized) entity that otherwise would, on Mannheim's criterion, only count as a global(ized) age cohort.

The Becks' double relation to Mannheim involves dropping his criterion of generational self-consciousness, while appealing to his generational sub-units concept. But this move may be logically inconsistent. Given that the Becks explicitly define the 'global generation' as lacking self-consciousness, this potentially greatly undermines their argument that such an entity could have opposed sub-units within it in the first place. For opposed sub-units must be part of *something*, and to call that something a 'generation' might suggest that it must fulfil Mannheim's criterion, namely that it must possess some degree of self-consciousness. This raises a general problem for all attempts to 'update' Mannheim: perhaps one cannot use the sub-units idea without also accepting the self-consciousness criterion too?

More empirically speaking, does it really make sense to say that, just because someone in one part of the world is born into 'the same' age cohort as someone else born about the same time in a different part of the planet, that they are really and meaningfully both members of the same 'generation'? Can one meaningfully label both persons as part of one single generation, even when the criterion of what counts as a 'generation' has been greatly loosened, with self-consciousness ditched as part of the definition of generations, and when the analyst is only really looking for trans-national commonalities of *social position* (working life precariousness, etc.), and not commonalities in *consciousness*?

Take the case of the young, upwardly-mobile, more educated Indonesian cruise-ship workers and the young, less educated, working and lower middle class white Australian holiday-makers whom they serve, studied by Artini, Nilan and Threadgold (2011). The Indonesians and Australians would be construed by the Becks as part of the same loosely defined 'generation', precisely by being members of different - perhaps opposed - fractions of it, and who, precisely by being members of those different generational units, are seen to *lack* shared generational consciousness. Rather perversely, it is the *absence* of shared generational consciousness

between the groups that seems to allow the Becks to label both groups as part of the same global generation!

But are the young Indonesians and Australians really members of the 'same' generation in any meaningful sense, beyond one that is so loose and ill-defined that it may be satisfactory for journalistic purposes but not for more rigorous sociological ones? They may have certain things in common at a very general level (e.g. shared media use, like using the internet; or shared cultural orientations, like wearing certain globally-present fashion brands). They may also share similar problems in a very general sense – precarious working conditions, no guarantees that education will lead to social advancement, etc. But are these shared elements sufficiently strong or *similar enough* - beyond superficial resemblances - for us really to talk of both groups as part of the *same generation*? Saying that they are members of different generational units of one generation does not really answer that question. It works to obfuscate the question.

By interpreting individuals as members of groups which are units of the same putative global generation, the social differences between those groups may well become understated or be conjured away altogether. The differences that might otherwise be glaringly obvious between young Indonesians and young Australians, or more broadly between Developing and Developed World groups of young people, can be underplayed if we understand them as merely differential expressions of the same generational entity that is assumed, by conceptual fiat rather than empirical demonstration, to exist. Indeed, how such an entity *could* be convincingly empirically demonstrated, rather than just theoretically asserted, remains unclear. The reasoning which animates the global generations concept is disputable on analytical and logical grounds, and it may be politically questionable too. Perhaps it would just be more analytically satisfactory, intellectually honest and politically preferable to conclude that each group is part of a global(ized) age cohort (e.g. people born across the planet between 1990 and 2000), and not part of a presumed 'global generation'?

Conclusion

There are two inferences to be drawn from the preceding discussion. The first is more negative: the idea of 'global generations' is a conceptual entity which, the more it is examined, the more problematic it proves to be. It may be best for social scientists simply to give up on it as too flawed and too difficult to operationalise convincingly. If even those otherwise highly adept and creative thinkers we have dealt with above have ended up in conceptual confusion and unhelpful forms of determinism in their attempts to develop the concept, then that must indicate the highly problematic nature of the concept. It strikes us that a major issue here is one not restricted to the study of generations or youth. This is that cosmopolitan forms of sociology can fall into the trap of claiming to find equally cosmopolitan phenomena that do not in fact really exist, or the existence of which is so difficult to prove, that it may not be worth the potentially wasted effort.

The second inference is more positive. Other authors dealing with the concept in the future may be able to learn from the conceptual mistakes that have already been made. This paper has diagnosed what those mistakes are, and therefore constitutes an agenda for others to follow, as to the problems needing solutions and the difficult conceptual terrains that must be navigated. One resource for that navigation is Mannheim's original set of ideas about generations. These

have been widely caricatured, including by those whose own efforts to rework them have been shown to be flawed, as old-fashioned because unattuned to global, cosmopolitan and cultural issues. But we have shown that Mannheim's position is at least open to such matters, and indeed in some ways explicitly and creatively theorizes them.

The caricaturing therefore should cease. Mannheim should be understood as a productive companion for scholars engaged in future attempts to think how the concept of social generations may be more satisfactorily related to globalization phenomena, and better applied as part of the conceptual apparatus of cosmopolitan types of sociology. Part of that endeavour will involve thinking through a central conceptual conundrum: can the generational units idea be decoupled from the generational self-consciousness criterion, without falling into logical inconsistency? Solving that riddle would help analysts to decide whether to operate in the more modest terms of global age cohorts, or the more ambitious terms of global generations. Such a solution would also aid the further development of social theory, cosmopolitan sociology and youth studies, and influence how they intersect in future.

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